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## PROFESSIONALISM AND TRUTH-SEEKING

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Present-day education is not without its problematic features, not merely in its elementary phases, but as well in those aspects of it which appear in our higher institutions of learning. It is not difficult for one who reflects soberly to find, at almost every turn, practices and ideals which may fairly be criticized. The general situation should, however, be viewed calmly and with an effort to discover its positive aspects, rather than, as the manner of some is, so excitedly as to be unable to do otherwise than hurl upon it wholesale condemnation.<sup>1</sup>

It is a platitude to say that the educational practices of a people are quite closely related to its economic, political, and in general to its social life. The correspondence is not of course complete, for the machinery of education possesses a certain unwieldiness and a kind of inertia that render it difficult for it to adjust itself rapidly to changing conditions and ideals in the social context. Moreover, when the adjusting movements are at length actually started this same inertia frequently causes equally serious maladjustments in the opposite direction. To this preliminary consideration we wish also to offer that, inasmuch as our educational conditions are a part of our present social development, it is about as useless to ask whether we can stem the educational tide as it would be to consider the same question with reference to old ocean.

We in educational work today face a situation that is very little of our own making. Educators who preceded us contributed something to it, and the general development of society contributed still more. We can do a little to modify it, but not much, and our chief consolation is to try to see that it is not as

<sup>1</sup> E. g., R. M. Wenley, "Can We Stem the Tide?" *Educational Review*, Vol. XXXIV, p. 241.

bad as its hysterical critics would have us think. If there is any good in present directions of movement, we can evidently accomplish more by throwing our atom in with the current than by trying to effect some other supposed good so unrelated to present lines of movement as to necessitate their stoppage through the setting up of counter currents. The latter course of action would be hopeless, while the former may not be altogether so, at least.

We shall attempt to answer the above question only with reference to one portion of the seemingly irresistible tide which bears down upon us, namely, the spirit of professionalism, which more and more pervades the arts departments of our universities. Two criticisms are frequent: First, the drift into professionalism has greatly reduced the time given to really liberal and humanizing studies, and hence the most general effect has been to greatly narrow the intellectual horizon of the average student. In the second place, the professional interest is subversive to true scholarship, because of its tendency to prevent one from being a real truth-seeker, opportunism, expediency, and commercial standards generally, all combining to make the learner see the world with perverted vision. Not the truth, it is held, but more or less refined forms of personal gain are sought after.

Now we wish, at the very outset, to admit that both of these tendencies exist today in connection with professionalism in university undergraduate education, but we wish to raise the question as to whether they are inseparably connected with that type of education, or whether liberality of training and a *true scholarly attitude toward truth* may be the outcome of even professional training, when its possibilities are more fully developed.

In relatively advanced stages of social development it is impossible that the full significance of the method and content of the current educational procedure should be apparent to the casual observer. The past is inevitably at hand, for ill as well as for good, to mystify as well as to clarify. Educational practices are not, under these conditions, the entirely spontaneous expres-

sion of the people's social life that they tend to be in earlier ages. In the earlier stages of social development, the educational practices are more definitely and clearly related to what the people feel to be their dominant needs. The things taught fit directly into the life the child is expected to lead when he comes to maturity. The studies are practical; none others would be imaginable, at least no one would think of suggesting any others. It may be argued that such is not the true function of education, but, in any case, this is the type of educational practice which grows up in a situation into which there has been carried over the least from the past, in which there is not a great body of traditions from a previous epoch of culture. That a course of study based directly upon practical conditions is truly cultural, the results of the old Athenian education are proof that is splendid and unequivocal. Evidently professionalism as such, in education, has not *always* deprived it of its cultural value. As the conditions of life change, and they inevitably do, it matters not here whether for better or for worse, the traditions of the past are bound to remain. In the new order the needs met by the old studies are not precisely what they were in the past, and yet these old studies are remembered to have been most cultural and humanizing, and the necessity of their continuance is argued from that ground. A most vital fact is apt to be overlooked, namely, that much of the cultural value of this old curriculum grew out of the fact that in it there found expression so clearly and so convincingly the life that was then being lived, pulsating as it was with problems and vital with interests.

The problem of the course of study is at best a gigantic one, and it is such partly because it is so difficult for us to free ourselves of the notion that there is something inherently sacred in subject-matter, as such, rather than in the growth of the learner; and partly also because it is literally hard to reconstruct, hard to read aright the new needs, hard to work out new presentations of human knowledge which shall adequately take the place of the old studies. Hence, in the face of honest efforts to bring forth a new interpretation of life more akin to what we are

actually living, there are many who are ready to point to the excellence of the old, as if, in some mysterious way, in its content and in its method, it were *intrinsically* cultural and humanizing. The obvious answer to such a plea is that the difficulty with present educational conditions is not exactly where the advocates of the older practice imagine it is; it is not in the fact that there is a tremendous development of interest in vocational subjects, or professional education, but in the failure, on all sides, to appreciate the real bases of culture. Culture inheres in no particular subject-matter, but arises from the method of approach to any and all subject-matter, from the way the individual finds himself in this subject-matter. We believe, moreover, that the professional studies usually pursued by the undergraduate as part of his arts course are distinctly liberalizing, potentially at least. That many do not, in their university work, obtain that broader humanized view of life, we do not deny, but we hold that the difficulty does not lie altogether in the professional subjects but in large degree in the false attitude toward them on the part of both instructor and student, *to a lack of appreciation of the truly liberalizing opportunities they afford.*

In order to make clear what these opportunities are, let us try to state to ourselves what a profession really is and in what a professional training may be said to consist. It may not be altogether trite to say that a profession is a particular line of human activity, and that, as such, it presumably possesses an organized body of fact peculiarly its own. Much of the subject-matter comprised in the so-called non-professional courses belongs also to the professional ones, *some* of it was once *strictly* professional, and it is only because vocations have multiplied and differentiated that their particular systems of knowledge are now no longer the peculiar property of any single life-calling.<sup>2</sup> It is further true that a generous portion of human knowledge

<sup>2</sup>It is not without significance for us here that the present content of the distinctly non-professional phases of the arts department is the lineal descendant of distinctly professional courses of three or four generations ago. Our American colleges, offering them an even narrower training than that afforded today, were professedly schools for the prospective minister, lawyer, teacher, and physician.

has accumulated quite explicitly with reference to various sorts of practical situations, so that whether it has ever been organized into a discipline for some particular professional training or not, it nevertheless has somewhat of the dust of the conflict upon it, it is even *bourgeoisie*, if you please to call it so. Now, as to just why some of this truth should have gotten separated from the rest and have come to be regarded as good in itself, is a curious psychological story into which we shall not enter here. There is, in any case, no good reason for making a qualitative distinction between so-called pure truth and the knowledge which serves practical purposes.

Since there are not different qualities of truth, it can scarcely be held that a really liberal training or a just sense of the proportionate greatness of affairs can be obtained from some particular phase of truth or some particular class of subjects. To be sure, human knowledge varies somewhat in its capacity to elevate one's spirit and it is safe to say that a training in but a single sphere of human thought, whether that be pedagogy, Greek, philosophy, natural science, or what not, would be narrowing, for certainly breadth of outlook and appreciation of relative values can come only, other things being equal, through a fairly wide acquaintance with the different lines of human endeavor and achievement. *Other things equal*, we say, and the other things are by no means to be ignored. They consist for one thing in one's *method of approach* to what he studies. *He* is not educated liberally who possesses merely some particular systems of facts, however great they may appear to be; rather he who has grown, who has developed into a new man in the course of his getting the facts. Or, more properly speaking, ready-made facts are never obtained by anyone, and true education is not a process of endeavoring to impart them. My facts are of my own construction, the product of my own efforts, no one has really ever given them to me. They are the outcome of my reaction upon various situations and problems which have genuinely confronted me. My mental structure is largely a direct index of the extent to which I have really lived and struggled with problems that have been actual to me and of the

extent to which I have been changed through the struggle. The liberalized and humanized attitude, if I have it, is likewise a construction of my own, and not something I may possibly have learned offhand. Any subject-matter, provided it is human and lies fairly close to life, is capable of producing educative results that are truly liberal as far as they go. Of course a liberal training cannot be obtained through studies limited to a narrow field, whatever the reputation of these studies as humanizers, whether Greek, pure mathematics, or unapplied science. One's training must surely have breadth of content, and while some subjects have more content than others, no subject can be said to contain all that one needs in adjusting his "bearings with some approach to poise and justice." Some fairly broad acquaintance with human culture is necessary, to be sure. A single study can contribute only a little, and some studies are more limited than others in this respect. Our point is that *every study* is *capable* of being liberalizing as far as its particular content goes, provided only the real man is in some way stimulated through coming in contact with it and that, as far as lies within it, it furnishes him the raw material and stimulus for growth.

This brings us to the second objection to professionalism in the work of the undergraduate. Is not this educative process, which is really growth, increase in power of some sort for the learner, really limited by the fact that his objective point is more or less practical? It must be *truth for its own royal sake*, we are told, or *pure truth*. The truth obtained through the professional course is always distorted by the practical interests of the quest. It must be admitted that this accusation, to a certain extent, is and has been justified. But here we would raise the question as to whether a biased and narrow view is inseparable from one's pursuit of practical ends, or whether it is simply an unfortunate circumstance due to other causes than the practical objective. To be sure the object of the quest is not truth for its own royal sake, but truth as a tool—a tool for what? For the acquisition of dollars, we are often told, and this doubtless completely describes the case as far as many are concerned. The

difficulty here, however, is certainly not with the practical, *per se*, but with the *particular variety* of the practical in which, to the exclusion of all else, the individual seems to be able to express himself.

What is really the essence of *the practical*, and what is a *practical* problem? Is it related altogether, in more or less subtle ways, to what concerns food and raiment and such like? A more fundamental conception of the practical is rather that it is the quality of those things which are felt to have some connection with our efforts to work out ourselves, i. e., to express our impulses primarily, and later our developed personality. This expression of personality finds outlet in part in the quest for food and raiment. For an all too large number of people, rich and poor, the personality is quite fully expressed through endeavors to obtain these basic forms of satisfaction. But even so, we are not to find here the complete philosophy of the practical. A goodly portion of humankind also work *because they are by nature active beings*, beings seeking expression. We are made to be doing something and the things we do of necessity lie partly along the line of mere sustenance, but it does not follow that all else we do is at least indirectly related to these elemental needs. Our several vocations and professions are certainly in a measure pursued because they are avenues along which we can work out ourselves in a variety of ways, for the life is more than meat and raiment. A goodly number of the long-suffering pedagogues teach, not merely to live, but because they love to do so and because they find in the varied activities falling to them a genuine expression of themselves. So with the farmer, the business man, the lawyer, not to speak of the minister. The work itself is attractive, the coping with adversaries in man and nature, with disease, with human frailty, the conquest of enemies, the solving of problems, the making of discoveries—it is in these things that people find opportunity to express themselves; this is what makes up life, and the practical is that which is related in some way to the furtherance of the process, whether it be prompted by the desire for food or whether it includes also other phases of the personality. The



prevailing scorn of all that savors of the practical by certain types of scholars seems to start from the assumption that the whole significance of the practical is to be summed up in the mercenary and commercial, while the real meaning of all human endeavor, professional as well as otherwise, is to be found in the fact that it is the expression of that which is within us.

Now, there is certainly no good reason, *a priori* at least, for asserting that he who is interested in truth as a means for working out himself, under which type of activity those which are called professional may fairly be classed, is particularly apt to fail of a just or fair vision of the truth. Taking truth as it is popularly conceived, we may surely assert that these are times in which, on every hand, there is rapidly developing a respect for and a demand for careful as over against careless and hasty views of situations which confront us. For the opposition, by the way, as far as we try to state it in our everyday doings, is never between the true and the false. We never deliberately choose the false. A more proper account of ourselves is that our moods vary from the careless to the careful, and the question we usually consciously decide is whether we shall be cautious and exacting in what we do, not whether we shall choose the course of truth rather than that of error. The truth-seeker is really the person who chooses, definitely and habitually to abandon the careless attitude in the sphere of activity in which he is engaged. Why, then, should the so-called practical pursuits be particularly unfavorable to the development of truth or of true conceptions of life and its values? They involve problems of relationship, of manipulating diverse elements, of marshalling chemical, physical, biological, and human factors in ways to bring about results of one sort or another. Do not the exacting conditions of modern life foster at every turn the careful attitude of mind, or to put it philosophically, the hearty respect for that which is true, the proper understanding of relationships and values, if you please? We are fast leaving the age when ignorance, or a one-sided view of a practical situation is desirable if one expects to cope with it successfully. Practice today *necessitates* truth, and a broad view of truth, too. If we

narrow the professional courses to include only what appears superficially to be needed at a particular moment, if we make them simply hodgepodes of scattering, unorganized, and distorted facts, we can scarcely assert, at any rate, that the practical needs of the present demand it.

There is, however, a real danger which the instructor and student alike must guard against in a professional course. It is easy for one to become so absorbed in the overt activities involved in such a course as to gain the impression that he is fulfilling *all* its requirements. It is easy to overdo any form of physical activity just because, when it is once started, it acquires a momentum of its own and seems to offer unlimited opportunities for the consumption of time. A beginner in any sort of shop work, for instance, may find himself so deficient in the elements of mere technical skill, that this aspect of his preparation for his profession may tend to consume all of his time and attention. The same thing may easily hold true of the student in chemistry or medicine and even in law. Every profession demands more or less attention to concrete details, but there is certainly no excuse, from even the most practical point of view, if the instructor of this student does not try to lead him out of this empirical stage into a more thorough comprehension of the broader requirements of his future vocation. As Professor Woodbridge said, in a recent number of the *Educational Review*, it is in the tendency to memorize or do mechanically without an appreciation of the meanings involved that we may find "the chief reason why education in industrial, technical, and professional subjects is so often despised as not making for culture." But such training *would be cultural* if meanings and relations were really worked out, if the getting of the subjects involved actual intellectual grappling with the principles involved. Surely the exigencies of practical life demand just such breadth of training.

In view of these things, we would seem to be laboring under a curious delusion if we think that more adequate conceptions of values and of the truth itself can be obtained when it is taken out of all relationship to human endeavor. Of course truth can

never really be completely separated and considered as an entity sufficient unto itself. As we have tried to point out, the primary fact about ourselves, whether we are pure scientists, transcendental philosophers, or practical men, is that we are all working out ourselves in some way, and the respect we acquire for truth is related to this working-out process. There are not two kinds of truth, one, a baser sort, related to these processes of human endeavor, and another type of purer quality, which exists, as far as we are concerned, only as an object for our contemplation and admiration. The same mental attitude of care, of respect for proper relations and just values, may be present in anyone who is *at work* in any true sense. True, the horizon is broader for some workers than it is for others; with some it is limited by food and raiment, but in any case the *type* of activity is, or may be, the same, whether it be that of *savant*, or horse doctor, and for either type the same liberalizing effects are not *intrinsically* impossible. In neither case is it limited by the opportunity or narrowed by necessity, but only by the man himself and his way of going at it. It is the privilege of every teacher of a professional subject to present it in such a way as to be productive of real growth, greatness of spirit, in the learner, and there is always the possibility that a teacher of the so-called non-professional subjects, the humanizing subjects, may present them in such a manner as to produce pedants, men of distorted vision with totally inadequate conceptions of the meaning of life and human relations.

When it comes to the question of who has the view from the angle of least distortion, who shall decide between the pure scientist or the philosopher and the one who studies to use? The vision of truth for its own royal sake may be and probably is as distorted as is the vision of the practical man. Cut it loose from the world of human relationships and problems and it is not quite the same truth as that which helped us over our difficulties. That it is more truly and characteristically perceived under the former conditions is yet to be proved. It is just possible that the men in Plato's allegory who came at last out of the cave and from looking at the shadows of reality

to a vision of absolute truth were, after all, turning their backs upon the real and coming only to a contemplation of the shadows.

What we urge, at any rate, is greater respect for the despised practical problem, a recognition of the fact that even the *bourgeoisie* is not without its redeeming features, that a part of the difficulty lies in our taking for granted that it is *merely* commercial, *merely* bad.